

*Invited Essay*

# **Ecotourism and Education for Sustainability: A Critical Approach**

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This paper considers the potential of ecotourism as a form of environmental education for sustainability. It reviews current concepts of education for sustainability and research on the educational impact of ecotourism, and points to a gap between the aspirations of education for sustainability and the outcomes of current ecotourism programs. The paper further argues that a critical approach to environmental education through ecotourism is the most appropriate form for contemporary concepts of sustainability, and illustrates how this approach can be applied to environmental education using a strategy of critical discourse analysis.

**Keywords:** Environmental education, Ecotourism, Sustainability, Critical discourse analysis.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper considers the potential of ecotourism as a form of environmental education for sustainability. It argues that a critical approach to environmental education through ecotourism is the most appropriate form for contemporary concepts of sustainability, and illustrates how this approach can be applied to environmental education using a strategy of critical discourse analysis.

Ecotourism is a family of tourist experiences and programs which are motivated by interest in authentic environments and a desire to promote environmental sensitivity, conducted in ways that respect the integrity of the areas visited, and which may promote environmental and social causes in those areas. Initially focusing on undisturbed natural environments, more recent definitions of ecotourism may also include adventure travel, cultural tourism, and alternative tourism (Card Miller 1994; Fennell and Nowaczek 2003; Lew 1998). This broader concept is assumed in this paper. Ecotourism has close connections with environmental education. Wearing and Neill (1999, 131) point out that ecotourism is “as much about environmental education, the fostering of attitudes and behaviour that is conducive to maintaining natural environments, and empowerment of host communities, as it is about fostering a sustainable industry.” In this respect, it is important to consider ecotourism in the context of current developments in environmental education.

Environmental education has become an important worldwide educational movement and a significant part of international environmental policy (Bhandari and Abe 2002; Fien and Greenall Gough 2001).

This has been accompanied by an expanding brief for environmental education, from a focus on natural ecosystems in local or national contexts, to greater recognition of the interrelationships among biophysical, social, economic, and political systems, and their local to global dimensions.

Alongside this has been an expansion of the aims and pedagogy of environmental education. Fien and Greenall Gough (2001, 187) outline three emphases in environmental education. First is the conventional approach to education about the environment, where it is seen as “a silo or an archive, the contents of which are resources to be learned about.” A second approach is education *in* the environment, where “nature has been treated as a gymnasium or a laboratory in which exercises and investigations are to be conducted.” Third, Fien and Greenall Gough identify an approach in which nature is conceived of as “an object of intrinsic value to be treated with reverence: a cathedral in which to worship, its contents sacred and therefore preserved.”

All these approaches can be seen in ecotourism (Hall and Lew 1998; Haskell 1999; Kimmel 1999). Some ecotourism ventures regard their clients as being on a fact-finding mission, plying them with information about the environments visited. Others, especially the adventure style of ecotourism, see activity and experience of the environment as the main aim. Third, ecotourism programs can be imbued with an ethos of the beauty and awe of nature, where tourists are encouraged to share in a reverence for the environment.

While these approaches to environmental education through ecotourism are interesting and worthwhile, they fail to live up to the demands of an education which would be compatible with current understanding of sustainability. Considerable research into environmentally sustainable development in recent years has recognised the complex interweaving of environmental, social, economic, and political considerations in promoting sustainability, with important implications for environmental education.

## 2. Education for sustainability

As Bhandari and Abe (2002) point out, education for sustainable development has become the focal point of environmental education. They describe its evolution as moving from an emphasis on changing behavior, understanding, knowledge, awareness, and skills, to a broader concept with a central focus on equity, quality of life, human rights, and environmental quality. Current notions of sustainability in an educational context are illustrated by Sterling (2001, 76), who identifies the key concepts of sustainable development as follows:

- interdependence of society, economy, and the natural environment, from local to global;
- citizenship and stewardship, including rights and responsibilities, participation and conservation;
- needs and rights of future generations;
- cultural, social, economic, and biological diversity;
- quality of life, equity, and justice;
- sustainable change, development, and carrying capacity; and
- uncertainty and precaution in action.

Such a wide-ranging concept will require new strategies beyond the three approaches described by Fien and Greenall Gough above. Extending environmental education in this way will be a challenge to much recent practice. For instance, Brookes (1999/2000, 28) argues that ecotourism discourse has not adequately addressed issues of sustainability. He also claims that education “plays a distinctive part in this, hinting at a sense of the public good and processes of agreed social and cultural transformation, while denoting a far more limited project of passing on information and relatively mundane behaviour modification.” If environmental education is to promote sustainability, it will need to scrutinise these practices and their theoretical foundations.

To the extent that research into sustainable development emphasises economic, social, and political elements as well as environmental ones, then education for sustainability needs to do the same. Equally, since equity, rights, quality of life, and human well-being are also seen as part of sustainability, then social, economic, and political values will be integral to this educational approach.

These developments have led a number of writers to call for a more value-oriented approach to environmental education. Fien and Greenall Gough (2001, 187) advocate “an approach to environmental education that encourages the practice of just, participatory and collaborative decision-making and involves critical analysis of the development of the nature, forms and formative processes of society generally and of the power relationships within a particular society.” Sterling (2001) also emphasises the need for ethical, critical, and holistic approaches to examining values and world-views which underlie contemporary environmental thinking, calling for a focus on multiple perspectives on issues and the deconstruction of ideologies in order to nurture the values needed to construct sustainable futures.

These arguments require a consideration of values of justice and democratic process as integral to sustainability. They will involve a critical approach to study which develops these values and applies them to experience, or, as Stevenson (1987, 75) puts it, to their “immediate use for the social value of a sustainable and emancipated quality of life.” This critical approach to values will require specific curriculum and teaching strategies appropriate to this task, as well as a new approach to environmental education research.

### **3. A critical approach to education for sustainability**

Just as environmental education has focused on knowledge and individual attitude change, so too has research into environmental learning been concerned with tracing the links between environmental knowledge and attitudes, expressed through various tests and attitude scales, and environmental action (Hwang et al. 2000; Orams 1994). These links have been difficult to demonstrate, and their impact on behaviour in real contexts even more so.

For instance, in explaining the limitations of their findings on the causes of responsible environmental behavior, Hwang et al. (2000, 25) comment: “It is suspected that there are some other variables, such as situational factors, that influence the effect of personal responsibility on intention to act.”

Beaumont (1999) produced related evidence which found that increased environmental knowledge resulting from ecotourism did not lead to corresponding increases in environmental attitudes and behaviours. Rather, greater knowledge and stronger attitudes were indicated among people who

undertook more frequent environmental activities independent of the ecotourist program being studied. Beaumont concluded that the responses of this group were part of a circular process in which participants who said that the ecotourism experience influenced their conservation views already had higher environmental interest, involvement, knowledge, and attitudes, and therefore strong ecotourist motivations. Beaumont interpreted these findings to mean that ecotourism experiences will continue the cycle of interest and involvement, and add to this strengthening of pro-environment attitudes. An implication of this is that ecotourism alone will have limited impact.

A similar study by Card Miller (1994) showed that the fact that many ecotourist clients were “converted” to ecocentric ideologies did not mean that they were all necessarily committed to sustainable values in general or with respect to particular issues. The ecotourist experience did confirm and strengthen some participants’ pro-environmental views, filled in gaps in the knowledge of others, and provided a context in which they could consider more fully their predispositions to sustainable beliefs and actions. Other participants, however, showed little change in pre-existing technocentric ideologies.

These studies suggest that, while ecotourism may make a real contribution to pro-environment attitudes, its impact depends on the more general experiences and predispositions of the participants. Especially important, given the broader value orientation of contemporary concepts of sustainability, will be the ability of people to integrate the ecotourist experience with more critical understandings of the social, economic, and political implications of human-environmental relationships and the values which are integral to dealing with them in sustainable ways.

This will not be achieved by the approach to individual knowledge and attitude change which has characterised past research and practice. Confounding such work is the inability of a highly individualised theoretical approach to comprehend the discursive context in which environmental knowledge and attitudes are formed and the social contexts, networks, and relationships in which people jointly construct their environmental practices in everyday life (Robottom and Hart 1995). If people are to be sensitised to the values of sustainability and their acting out in practice, they need to see this practice in the context of the values and activities which influence their own experience.

Pepper (1987) proposes an educational program which illustrates what is needed here. He claims that the aims of such environmental education must be for participants to do the following:

1. Criticise conventional wisdoms (such as that promoted in the media)
2. Explore the material and ideological bases of this wisdom (by identifying who gains and who loses from these ideas)
3. Open their minds to alternate world-views (using empathy strategies such as role-play)
4. Experience working and living cooperatively in the field (for example, using sustainable practices in an environmental field centre)
5. See that humans can act collectively to shape society (through participation in community improvement programs)

Ecotourism can directly address the fourth of these aims and is a valuable part of the process. The fifth aim is to integrate these experiences into the activities of everyday life through collaborative work,

which builds networks and relationships necessary for social and environmental action. (See for instance, Niesenbaum and Gorka 2001; Vaske and Kobrin 2001.) However, both these aspects of environmental education need to be conducted in a context which demonstrates for participants the links between their experiences and the social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental values of sustainability. This incorporates Pepper's calls for the criticism of conventional wisdom and the opening of participants' minds to alternate world-views.

#### 4. Critical discourse analysis and ecotourism

One way of looking at this task is provided by the theory of discourse. Discourse analysis comprises a range of theories and research strategies which show how meanings operate in social relationships and practices. It offers a framework for seeing how the social world, the interactions which comprise it, the identities (or subjectivities) of individuals within it, and the institutions which structure its relationships are based on and operate through systems of meaning and language (Davies 1994; Gee 1990).

In environmental education, critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989) entails looking critically at how we think about environmental issues, the language, theories, and perspectives we use, the dominant discourses in our everyday lives (what Pepper calls conventional wisdom), and how these discourses produce their effects and construct power relations. It shows how power operates to make certain views seem natural and to constrain other alternative perspectives. It makes people more able to see how their beliefs and practices are influenced by dominant views in the media and other institutions. In education for sustainability, it would show how a sustainable approach is related to values of justice, well-being, and conservation, and how this might conflict with other values, beliefs, and practices. Discourse theories are beginning to appear in environmental education research (Brookes 1999/2000; Tamatea 2001; Whitehouse 2001), but are not yet established in the environmental education curriculum. It is proposed here that a teaching approach through critical discourse analysis would make environmental education more compatible with contemporary views of sustainability.

The following example illustrates how critical discourse analysis can be applied to a study of tourism. It is taken from a professional development program which aimed to promote education for sustainability (Fien 1993). One component of the program dealt with sustainable tourism, and used a critical discourse analytic approach to open up a sustainable ecotourist approach (Gilbert 1993).

The unit was developed for Australian teachers and aimed to increase participants' understanding of the operation of tourism in developing countries, its impacts on life in those countries, the implications for change at the personal and policy levels, and the educational implications of these issues. The unit aimed to promote

- knowledge of the nature and significance of tourism in developing countries;
- understanding of the benefits and problems for people in developing countries of various forms of tourism, especially in terms of quality of life, social justice, and sustainability;
- a critical awareness of the political economy of tourism in developing countries and aspects which need to be changed to protect the welfare of people and environmental quality in those countries; and

- a personal commitment to promoting tourist activity which will maximise rather than detract from the welfare of people and environmental quality in host countries.

The unit began with a discussion activity to raise major issues and focus on the chief aims of the workshop. Based on analysing descriptions of tourist attractions in Asian countries from tourist promotion brochures, the workshop raised questions about the images of these countries constructed in the tourist industry, the popular forms of tourist activity, and the economic and other impacts of tourism on these countries.

The aim was to show how the impact of tourism is partly a result of the demand created by the image marketed by tourist operators. The nature of tourism development is significantly affected by the images consumers hold about the desirable aspects of a place, since it is the consumers to whom the appeal is being aimed. In this way, consumers are reflexively involved in the development of tourism in these countries. Consequently, sustainable tourism development will require that consumers are more aware of the potential impacts of their responses to marketing campaigns.

Tourist destinations are products discursively constructed for consumption in two ways: first, as images to appeal to the consumer, and second, as actual sites for buildings, services, work, and the everyday activities of people living in these areas. These two constructions are related, but the image is not a simple reflection of a pre-existing tangible reality. Tourism operators construct images based in part on the existing resources of the destination, but they tailor the image to what they think consumers want. This desired image then becomes the model for the construction of physical facilities and associated services, activities, and work; so the image is then constructing the reality. Both the promotional image and the built reality are constructed within a discourse of tourist consumption.

The following questions were addressed to the tourist literature to open up their discourses to scrutiny:

What aspects of the places are highlighted? What have the writers assumed the tourists want? What kind of person is this implied tourist? How successfully does the material stimulate your interest? How does it do this? Are there things you might want to do in these places which are not mentioned? If so, why are they omitted?

What is the dominant image of the place? Is it a narrow stereotype or does it reflect the variety of life in these destinations? What images of the people are presented? How well would they recognise themselves in the material? Does the image in any way enhance or demean their standing as people?

How would this image feed back into the construction of the environment and life in these places? What kind of environment would the realisation of the images create? What problems might arise from the construction of it? What impact would the provision of these images have on the life and work of the people?

This approach through critical discourse analysis reveals how dominant discourses operate in tourist image creation and develops new perspectives on tourism development.

A second activity focused more directly on the values involved in judging whether tourism development was sustainable. By asking participants to classify consequences of tourism development as a benefit, a problem, both a benefit and a problem, or a neutral effect, the activity revealed the

complexities of the issues and the various perspectives from which they can be judged. The activity asked participants to classify statements such as:

- International tourists bring foreign currency into the host country.
- Entertainment based on traditional culture is often presented for tourists at international hotels.
- Some governments in developing countries offer investment incentives to tourist developers and operators.
- The tourist industry generates costs for the host country, including infrastructure, interest on loans, profits to overseas operators, and imports used in tourist operations.
- Tourist's tastes (e.g., for clothing, consumer goods, and even values) can be taken up by local inhabitants in what is called the demonstration effect.
- Tourism increases the demand for agricultural produce and local crafts.
- Tourist development is usually very concentrated in a few small areas, leading to particularly strong growth in capital cities.

This activity illustrates the competing ethical, economic, social, and environmental discourses involved in judging the sustainability of any tourist development. In deciding whether a certain point is a benefit or not, participants use criteria that reveal the values about development which are involved in these discourses. The aim is to open up the issues to critical scrutiny—what Pepper referred to as opening participants' minds to alternative world-views.

The unit then analysed case studies of tourist development in selected locations to increase participants' knowledge of the actual impacts of tourism. It also included an activity in which participants reviewed alternative tourist roles and suggested codes of visitor behaviour for sustainable tourism to developing countries. Finally, participants constructed advertisements for a tourist visit to their own localities which would promote a sustainable tourist experience, an exercise which involved the construction of an alternative discourse more in line with sustainable values.

By applying these strategies of critical discourse analysis, participants deconstruct dominant images of the tourist industry and identify their effects. The approach lays bare the multiple discourses at work in deliberating on and making decisions about these issues, and focuses on the values involved in acting sustainably. It shows how these discourses are related to the practice of tourism, how they can be viewed differently, and how behavior could be changed to enact a more sustainable tourist practice. In this way, a critical discourse approach lays the basis for linking tourist experience with the values of environmental integrity, human well-being, and rights which distinguish contemporary concepts of sustainability. As a result, critical discourse analysis fills a gap in the rather limited, individualised, and experiential approach of conventional ecotourism.

## 5. Conclusion

A sustainable approach to tourist development is one which respects the integrity of environments in all their aspects, promotes human well-being and environmental quality, and upholds values of rights, equity, and conservation. Ecotourism can be an important model of this approach and has much to offer environmental education for sustainability. Research shows that the experience of ecotourism is not in

itself sufficient to bring about authentic, sustainable environmental educational outcomes. A broader approach is required which focuses on the values associated with the contexts of everyday life, and how they influence people's predispositions to sustainable practices. One such approach is through critical analysis of the discourses implicated in sustainable development. This paper has illustrated one application of critical discourse analysis as an approach to sustainable environmental education. If ecotourism is to achieve the broader aims of current concepts of education for sustainability, then ways need to be found to incorporate such a critical approach.

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